

Eye Disease Management

With life expectancy figures continuing to climb, managing eye disease successfully can be essential for people to live healthy, happy, and productive lives. By performing a regular, comprehensive eye exam, your optometrist can successfully detect these diseases. Then, your optometrist can treat these diseases in conjunction with your other health care providers.

Age-Related Macular Degeneration (AMD)

AMD, the leading cause of blindness in the United States, is caused by deterioration of certain cells in the macula, a portion of the retina located at the back of the eye that is responsible for clear, sharp vision.

Cause: Unsure, could be attributed to lack of certain vitamins and minerals to the retina; circulation breakdown to the retina; excessive levels of cholesterol or sugar in the diet; hypertension; excessive exposure to ultraviolet light; and heredity.

Symptoms: The gradual loss of ability to see objects clearly, distorted vision, a gradual loss of color vision and a dark or empty area appearing in the center of vision.

What you can do: If you are over 50, you need to schedule an eye examination at least every two years with your optometrist.

Good News: Certain deep green and dark yellow or orange fruits and vegetables, such as: spinach, cantaloupe, mango, acorn or butternut squash and sweet potatoes, may help prevent or slow the progression of AMD.

At high-risk: AMD is high among Caucasians ages 65 to 74 (11 percent); women tend to get the disease more than men. However, the incidence of this disease is low among African Americans, Asians and American Indians.

Cataracts

Cataracts, caused by chemical changes in the lens, will cloud all or part of the normally clear lens within your eye. Cataracts are the leading cause of vision loss.

Cause: Advancing age, heredity, injury, or disease.

Symptoms: Blurred or hazy vision; appearance of spots in front of the eyes; increased sensitivity to glare or the feeling of having a film over the eyes. (Your optometrist can diagnose a cataract and monitor its development and prescribe changes in eyeglasses or contact lenses to maintain good vision.)

What you can do: Don't smoke and avoid over-exposure to sunlight. Cigarettes and ultraviolet (UV) light produce free radicals and may play a role in cataract development, according to researchers at the Mayo Clinic.

Good News: More than 95 percent of people who have cataracts removed end up with better vision.

At high-risk: About half of Americans between the ages of 65 and 75 have cataracts to some degree.

Diabetic Retinopathy

Diabetes is a disease that interferes with the body's ability to use and store sugar, which causes many health disorders including vision problems. People with diabetes are at risk of developing diabetic retinopathy, which can weaken and cause changes in the small blood vessels that nourish the retina.

Cause: Diabetes, often undetected until vision problems occur.

Symptoms: Early stages of diabetic retinopathy may cause blurred vision or may produce no visual symptoms at all. As the disease progresses, you may experience a cloudiness of vision, blind spots, or floaters.

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What you can do: Monitor your disease through diet and exercise under a doctor's supervision. Inform your optometrist that you are diabetic and schedule a dilated eye examination at appropriate intervals to detect changes in the retina or optic nerve.

Good News: Early diagnosis and timely treatment have been proven to prevent vision loss in more than 90 percent of patients. However, an estimated 50 percent of patients are diagnosed too late for effective treatment.

At high-risk: African Americans are 1.7 times more likely to have diabetes than Caucasians, according to the American Diabetes Association.

Glaucoma

Glaucoma, one of the leading causes of blindness in the United States, is the result of a build-up of pressure in the eye, resulting in damage to the nerve fibers, optic nerve, and blood vessels in the eye.

Cause: Not known, although heredity and age might be factors.

Symptoms: The most common type of glaucoma develops without symptoms, gradually and painlessly. A rare form occurs rapidly and its symptoms may include blurred vision, loss of side vision, seeing colored rings around lights and pain or redness in the eyes. Your optometrist can detect glaucoma by measuring the internal pressure of your eye and observing the health of your optic nerve during a comprehensive eye examination.

What you can do: If you are over 40 or have a family history of glaucoma, you'll want to schedule

a yearly exam. If glaucoma is detected, you need to take your medication exactly as prescribed.

Good News: If detected early, glaucoma can be controlled. However, at least half of the people who have glaucoma are not receiving treatment because they are unaware of their condition. If this disease is not detected, it can lead to permanent blindness.

At high-risk: Glaucoma is the number one cause of vision loss in African Americans.

U.S. Health and Human Services Department and MayoClinic.com provided some of this information.

